SAUSAGES ON ASH WEDNESDAY:
A NEW PIETY AND PRACTICE
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Psalm 100
Luke 5:33–39

"No one puts new wine in old wineskins."
Luke 5:37 (NRSV)

A true church exists when the Word of God is rightly preached
and the sacraments rightly administered.

John Calvin
1509–1564

We need the biggest dose of God we can get
when we gather for worship on Sunday morning
. . . to behold God's splendor and respond with
adoration and service and sacrifice.

Marva Dawn
A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds
to your lively presence,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On Ash Wednesday, in the year 1522, a group of citizens in the Swiss city of Zurich gathered in the town square to eat sausages, publicly and conspicuously. In the medieval church, a Lenten fast was required of all believers: no meat or dairy products for forty days, beginning on Ash Wednesday. And so it became something of a hallmark of the Reformation for people to declare their ecclesiastical loyalties by publicly refusing to keep the Lenten fast (see William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 97).

At the outset I want to be clear that my attempt at a lighthearted sermon title means no disrespect. Fasting is an ancient and honorable Christian practice, which many people—Catholic and Protestant—maintain today. I

happen to love sausage: Polish, Italian, Jimmy Dean, links, or patties. I don't want to watch them being made, but I do think they are one of our great inventions. I do not, however, eat sausage or much of anything on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday as a matter of a very small personal discipline. And I recall, not altogether fondly, that fish was always on the dinner menu in my home on Friday when I was growing up, not for religious reasons but because, my mother explained, all our Catholic neighbors were eating fish and so the stores had fresh fish available on Friday. So we ate fish on Friday, which I did not care for, and I regarded it as a great personal sacrifice, which I hope God noticed and appreciated.

So I mean no disrespect. In fact as always happens in the middle of a revolution, a lot of what was good about the past is thrown out with a lot of what was not so good. The sixteenth-century Reformers, particularly the Calvinists, pretty much threw out all of centuries of accumulated piety and spirituality and started all over again.

Only now, 500 years later, in our lifetime, have Protestants reconsidered and sat down to discuss worship and practice with Roman Catholics, to pray together, to participate in one another's worship, to recover some of the wisdom and beauty and authenticity and spiritual depth that was unceremoniously disposed of, and to share new traditions, new forms of devotion and worship.

Eating sausage on Ash Wednesday, nevertheless, was a demonstration that the old was coming to an end and something new was being born: in Jesus' words, no more patches on the old wineskin, but a whole new skin. The sixteenth-century Reformers, principally John Calvin, set out to reinvent the church, the way it governs itself, the way it worships, the way individual Christian people live out their faith. And it is to that enormous change—both in churches but also in society at large—that we look this morning, in this series of sermons on the thought and impact and relevance of John Calvin.

Medieval Catholicism, the medieval church, was an elaborate, complex, and beautiful institution. In terms of personal devotion, there was a wide range of practices: pilgrimages to sacred places, venerating relics, prayers for the Virgin Mary's intercession and blessing, engaging in confession and acts of penance. Presbyterian theologian William Stacy Johnson says all these practices were designed to gain spiritual merit, to help the individual be a good person and a faithful Christian (*John Calvin: Reformer for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 97).

Johnson says that John Calvin's mother was particularly devoted to venerating relics and that, as a boy, Calvin would have been immersed in the system. As an adult, Calvin would leave it all behind and sarcastically

observe that “the cathedrals spread over Europe had enough splinters of the cross to launch a fleet of ships.”

I need to add that when a Protestant talks about medieval, pre-Reformation Catholicism, we are talking about our own history. There was only one type of Christianity, Roman, and it is our heritage as well as our Catholic neighbors’. Furthermore, neither of us—Protestants or Catholics—are the same church today that we were before the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the Roman Church.

Calvin, a brilliant legal scholar, became interested in the reforming thinking and writing coming from Germany, particularly from Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, professors in Wittenberg. Calvin was French, living and studying in Paris. When the king of France began to arrest, jail, and execute the new reformers, Calvin left and settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his life. Geneva, by act of its city council, had recently decided to side with the Reformation. Roman Catholic churches became Reformed-Protestant churches overnight. The several hundred priests attached to Geneva’s seven parish churches, including the huge Cathedral of St. Pierre in the old city, were invited to become Protestant ministers or leave. Most left. The church was leaderless. When officials learned that a brilliant Reformed scholar and lawyer was in the city, a refugee, they invited him to stay and to create a new, Reformed church. It was an offer Calvin could not resist. So he stayed and went to work.

He spoke almost every day from the pulpit of the cathedral. And in a small building beside the cathedral, known as the Auditorium, he lectured, almost daily, on the Bible. People had never heard anything like it: the Christian faith proclaimed, exclaimed, and taught in their own language.

He set out to reorganize the churches of Geneva. In *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, which he published in 1542, he outlined a new way of being the church, without a hierarchy. Actually he thought he was returning to the original, early church.

The churches of Geneva would be governed by a Consistory, made up of ministers and laity representatives from the seven congregations. The Company of Pastors, which gathered every Friday morning in the Auditorium, studied scripture, debated, examined candidates for ministry, recruited new leadership for the pulpits of the church. Together the Consistory and Company of Pastors functioned as a kind of Corporate Bishop. It was all open: people saw and heard what was going on, and it was stunning. In fact, people from all over Europe and Great Britain, fleeing persecution, started showing up in Geneva to see it and to hear its brilliant leader, John Calvin.

If you visit Geneva, you can see the Auditorium, which is still there beside the great cathedral. After World War II, it was restored and renovated, and the pastor of this church at the time, Harrison Ray Anderson, raised much of the money for the project (I suspect much of it from people in his congregation). And so on the chancel of the Auditorium is a communion table with a brass plaque that indicates that the table was given by the people of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, in memory of those who died during the war.

The shape of modern Presbyterianism began to emerge out of Calvin's thinking: a church governed by its own members and pastors; a church with no hierarchy, no bishops; an educated ministry charged with conveying and teaching an intellectually viable gospel; a laity that is literate, invited to bring their minds as well as hearts to worship, and that fully participates in the life and worship of their church.

And then Calvin turned his attention to worship. Medieval Catholicism had evolved and refined the Mass over the centuries, a beautiful liturgical reenactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, which culminated in the Eucharist—the sharing of the bread and wine, which, in Catholic tradition, during the Mass becomes the actual body and blood of Christ. Priests conducted mass every day, at least once. The language was Latin, the language of the empire and the church. Something like 99 percent of the population of Europe was illiterate; a very tiny percentage knew any Latin. So most people did not understand it. But the saying of mass daily—in hundreds of thousands of churches—was the foundation of the remarkable survival and endurance of Christianity down through the centuries.

The devout could attend mass daily or weekly. It was a feast for the senses. During mass, people heard bells, clergy chanting, saw candles, smelled incense, and waited for the presiding priest to elevate the host when the bread literally became the body of Christ. Churches were filled with art, pictures and statues, frescoes depicting stories from the Bible and the lives of the saints. "It was a religion for the senses," Stacy Johnson says (p. 137). You cannot love beauty or regard beauty as a gift of God without being profoundly grateful for the mass and the church, which became the repository of beauty through what we used to call the Dark Ages. Some of the most sublime music human beings have ever created was written for the mass: J. S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, Verdi's *Requiem.* And some of the greatest art ever painted or sculpted—Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Giotto's amazing frescoes at Assisi—was for the church to express the faith. Even the most belligerent Protestant understands the importance of the church and the mass to our civilization.

Calvin looked to the early church for a model and chose simplicity. At the center of worship, not the sacrifice of the mass, but the Word of God

proclaimed. And so a reaction set in, sometimes violent: out went pictures and statues; the walls were whitewashed: out went the rood screen, the elaborately carved stone screen between the people standing in the nave and the clergy performing the ritual of the mass. Out went the elaborate altar located on the chancel, behind the screen, and in its place a plain table, for the Sacrament, the Lord's Supper, in plain view of the people.

When it came to a liturgy for worship, Calvin interestingly kept many of the elements and the basic shape of the mass, but it would all be in the vernacular—no kneeling, nothing to separate clergy from the people, no clergy vestments, but gowns, street clothes.

When they came to worship in Geneva, people would be called to worship with words of scripture.

A common, corporate prayer of confession would replace the private confessional.

Scripture would be read and a sermon preached.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, both bread and wine, for all the people, followed by prayers, alms, and blessing. It is the basic shape we follow still. And the shape of it is not terribly different from what is going on at Holy Name, St. James Episcopal, First Methodist, or Trinity Lutheran Church.

Two major innovations in Calvin's liturgy:

> The Lord's Supper, in both bread and wine for all the people, every time. Given the complexity of the mass and church architecture, it was customary for people to partake of the elements—bread only—once a year, usually Easter. On every other occasion, the clergy said the ritual, ate the bread and drank the wine for the people. Calvin said it is for all, every time, and he said that while Christ is mystically present in the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup, the elements remain bread and wine.
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> The second innovation was singing. The medieval mass inspired gorgeous music, from Gregorian chants to Mozart. Calvin loved good music and said worshipers should praise their God by raising their own voices in song. The psalms, in particular, were written to be sung by ancient Israel. So psalm singing should be part of worship. Musicians were retained to create the tunes for the beloved words of the psalms. Originally they were sung in unison, no harmony, led by a cantor. A book, *The Geneva Psalter*, was published in 1551, and twelve hymns and psalm settings in our own hymnal, are from that sixteenth-century Geneva

collection. The most famous, beloved, and familiar, *Old Hundredth*, was written by one of the musicians hired by the Geneva church, Louis Bourgeois. We sing his tune at the beginning of worship every Sunday. The Pilgrims brought the *Geneva Psalter* to the New World and built their own worship around it.

John Calvin, in breaking with the past and reinventing the church, its governance and worship, began a movement that has spawned literally thousands of ways to be the church and hundreds of ways to worship God. Today right here in Chicago you can find a Mass said in Old Latin, a rousing Gospel choir on the South Side, down the street a Pentecostal service with eruptions of emotion and spirit-filled speaking, a Greek Orthodox ritual a thousand years old unchanged, and in the suburbs a theater setting with stage and overhead projectors, a band with guitars and percussion, handheld mikes, simple songs, and a minister in open-collared sport shirt sitting on a stool. And you can on occasion find this, what we aspire to be here: Reformed in style, drawing from the best of the whole Christian tradition, including our own, singing the old psalms and hymns written recently, pipe organ but also the music of American jazz musician Dave Brubeck on occasion, with a sermon and a people responsible for their own church, listening, sometimes challenging, then appropriating what they have heard for the living of their daily lives and returning next week, like a family, to gather for reunion and sustenance.

On occasion I have been invited to preach at Old St. Pat's Roman Catholic Church in the South Loop. It's one of my favorite things to do. There are always good-natured allusions to my heresy—not theological, but my baseball loyalties. The priests and people at Old St. Pat's think of themselves as a White Sox parish. When we get past that, though, I am perfectly at home there, not on enemy territory: the language is English; the service is open, visible to all; people sing hymns; the homily is literate, relevant; and people come forward to commune. After 500 years of hostility —sometimes violent—suspicion and separation, we are listening to one another, learning from one another, and who knows, maybe playing a small role in the renewal and reunion of the whole church of Jesus Christ once again.

Two weeks ago today we were in Russia visiting St. Petersburg and Moscow, where the Russian Orthodox Church, after seventy years of oppression and persecution under Communism, is alive and well. After the Revolution of 1917 and the Communist takeover, most churches were shut down, turned into stables for cattle and horses, cabbage warehouses, museums. Some prominent churches were destroyed. Russian Orthodox priests were jailed, exiled to Siberia; those who protested or dared to criticize were shot. Moscow's magnificent Cathedral of Christ the Savior was dynamited by Stalin and the site turned into a public swimming pool.

Because the Communist leaders wanted the world to believe there was true human freedom in their system, a few showcase churches were allowed to remain open, with a few clergy, no schools, no literature published, no teaching the children, no social work, no activity outside the walls. As long as the clergy remained quiet and didn't object, they were allowed to say mass, to worship. And that is what they did—all they did, all they could do—for seventy years. It was not a good idea to be seen going to church or to be identified as a believer. Christians could not work for the government, were denied advancement in business and industry; their children were denied admission to good schools, colleges and universities, were occasionally spied on and harassed. And so everyone stopped attending and worshiping, except old women, grandmothers, known affectionately as the Babushkas. They had nothing to lose and were willing to risk disapproval of the authorities and neighbors and their own children. So they continued to come to church, to pray, to receive the Eucharist, and to preserve the devotional practices of their historic faith, the veneration of their amazing icons. No power on earth could stop them. And it was enough.

Marva Dawn, a modern scholar of worship practice, says "taking God seriously is decidedly countercultural," not just in a Communist system but here, as well. We live in a time and culture that wants to put market value on everything—Bill Gates said going to church "is not an efficient" use of time. Marva Dawn says we want to "turn the worship of God into a matter of personal taste and time, convenience and comfort. Consequently, we need the biggest dose of God we can get when we gather to worship on Sunday morning . . . to summon us to behold God's splendor and respond with adoration and sacrifice and service" (*A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God*, p. 8).

The biggest dose of God we can get—that happens to me here, in this place, when organ and choir and brass and congregation sing God's praise and mystery, when we join our voices and our hearts, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow."

And it happened in Moscow on Sunday morning two weeks ago—World Communion Sunday, it turned out. I was thinking about and missing my church, my congregation on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, sitting and listening to the Word, celebrating the Lord's Supper. By lovely happenstance, I assume, our tour group was visiting the new and rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Its destruction by Stalin, Moscow's cathedral, was a deep wound to the city's spirit. The public swimming pool on the site added insult to injury, a reminder every day. When the Communist regime fell and the churches were allowed to operate freely again, the Russian Orthodox Church decided to rebuild the beautiful cathedral, exactly as it was with its distinctive bright gold onion domes, its

gorgeous art and icons. Contributions came from all over the world and from the people of Moscow.

Our tour entered as a service was in process. It was crowded, a thousand people or so were standing in the nave with gorgeous chandeliers overhead as a strikingly vested priest preached. Our group stood in the back, but I wanted to see, to participate, so we edged our way forward almost to the front. We stood admiring the art, looking up into the dome, smelling the incense, and listening to the preacher, and it almost didn't matter that he was speaking in Russian. At the end of his sermon he was joined by half a dozen or so priests, and as the priest and male choir from high up in a balcony chanted and sang a gorgeous litany—deep, rich voices resonating in the high ornate dome—the gospel was carried in procession and read. And then the Words of Institution—even in Russian I knew what he was saying: "On the night of his arrest, Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed it he broke it . . ."

When it came time to commune, people came forward to one of three stations: the presiding priest carefully spooned wine into each mouth, even of tiny babies held by their parents. There were people of all ages: young fashionable adults, couples, children, adolescents in T-shirts, and the elderly. I heard a sound, like a murmur. I looked around: it was the old women, the Babushkas, softly singing. On and on it went, the people receiving the sacrament—old, young, the babies—and the singing. The old women who had kept the Christian faith, the church, alive by stubbornly, courageously coming to worship every day for seventy years were softly singing an old traditional Russian hymn.

It was a big dose of God, and it made me grateful for what I was witnessing and what was happening in churches all over the world, millions of them. And it made me deeply grateful for my tradition, Reformed-Presbyterian, my hymns and prayers, and grateful for John Calvin and grateful for the human spirit that will not be denied or intimidated, that understanding deep in our hearts that we are human, that understanding when we put our lives in relationship to the God who created us and gave us life and came in Jesus Christ to redeem us and save us. I was newly grateful for the privilege of worship, to gather with the people of God, to hear God's word, to pray and sing and to join my voice with untold millions, past, present, future in the praise of God. Amen.